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ABSTRACT

While few business people dispute the importance of carefully crafting persuasive, demanding, conciliatory, and bad-news letters, the regular flow of routine communications receives very little meaningful consideration or scrutiny. These routine communications (letters, inquiries, requests, collection letters, complaints, confirmations, acknowledgments, adjustments, invitations, reminders and replies) may seem trivial and of minor importance unto themselves, but they often form the basic impression that customers and others have of an individual and his or her organization. Such communication needs to possess certain qualities if they are to accomplish the task at hand while also influencing future sales positively. Courtesy is critical. Proper use of English is a must. Business communication education should focus on the recipient's point of view. Form letters should be employed selectively. Personality should be included in routine communications, and local norms in the use of electronic mail should be respected. Professional business communicators should also use a sensible approach and ask relevant review questions before finalizing a communication. (Contains 29 references.) (RS)

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Making Routine Letters Have Positive Effects

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If a situation is particularly important, or if a transaction is critical, then certainly many businesspeople would acknowledge that each step in the writing process will need special attention, from planning through drafting, revising, editing, and ultimately finalizing the composition (Somers, 1980). Generally speaking, few dispute the importance of carefully crafting persuasive, demanding, conciliatory and bad-news letters, to mention just a few (Dumont and Lannon, 1988). But there is also a regular flow of routine communications that often receives very little meaningful consideration or scrutiny (Wells, 1988).

These seemingly simple communications are actually quite important. Most workers have few opportunities that are so potentially far-reaching but that nonetheless so frequently tend to slip away unrecognized, as those provided by everyday, seemingly mundane communications--those that make up the broad range of almost any firm's correspondence (Huseman, Lahiff, and Penrose, 1991). These include order letters, inquiries, requests, collection letters, complaints, confirmations, acknowledgments, adjustments, situational instructions, invitations, reminders, replies, and much, much more. And, contrary to some professional people's expectations, computers have tended to increase the number of these letters, notes, and memos, rather than contributing to their reduction (Shaiken, 1988).

It is very easy for an overworked and preoccupied businessperson to underestimate the importance of the constant flow of correspondence that he or she generates. A review of the paperwork that is received by both executives and subordinates in any given week--that which has been generated by others--will provide ample evidence of the need for increased attention to this neglected area. Routine communications are often flawed in both form and expression (Swift, 1985). Many feature grammatical errors, are lacking in clarity, and are perfunctory in tone. Furthermore, the viewpoint of the individual or the organization to which the correspondence is addressed is frequently ignored or only minimally acknowledged (Bell, 1992).

All correspondence can affect sales

However, the excuse that "other people have problems with this sort of thing too," should be dismissed immediately by the person who would be truly successful. For these routine letters, which may seem rather trivial and of minor importance unto themselves, will often form the basic impression that customers, fellow employees, and the representatives of other firms have of an individual and of his or her organizaton. The effect that this constant flow of letters will have on the prestige and the good will of the department and the firm, as well as on the actual sales resistance, will be considerable (Vik, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson, 1990; Rittman and Gonzalez, 1991; Locker, 1992).

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The responsiveness to others' needs, the aura of sensitivity, and the manifest efficiency that these letters demonstrate may or may not be representative of the entire firm. But the combination of these characteristics will be read in an undifferentiated way not only as the message but also as the voice of the firm (Lesikar, 1991).

The routine communications of the entire organization should therefore be seen from a truly special perspective. All employees who engage in correspondence should be impressed with the fact that every letter is actually a sales letter of some sort and, although many of these sales may be only psychological in nature, others may literally result in a financial transaction, either now or at some time in the future. In fact, in almost every letter that is being sent to a customer, there is a possible sales angle that should at least be considered. And, even if the correspondent decides not to include that sales angle, the positive approach that would have been used with it should be retained (Vik, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson, 1990; Penrose, Rasberry, and Myers, 1993).

In fact, it is one of the basic tenets of marketing theory that although firms must operate at a profit, the first priority of any business should be the identification of customer needs and the development of means to satisfy those needs. The interactive processes of selling are to follow out of that consideration of customer needs and are to always be subordinate to it (Berkowitz, Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelius, 1994). Clearly, no business enterprise can live up to this objective in every instance but organizations should never stop trying to do so.

For example, it's extremely unfortunate if adjustments are handled by an employee who only tries to pacify irritated customers without giving some thought to possible means of accommodation which may result in future sales opportunities (Bell, 1992). Collecting overdue bills, a process which often provides easy opportunities to encourage subsequent purchases, is frequently handled negatively and with a short-sighted harshness that can create permanent alienation (Bohner, 1992). This, too, is unfortunate. Finally, in an important related area, the employee also needs to be aware that co-workers have egos too and in communicating with them he or she needs to be aware of these associates' needs and sensitive to them (Pearce, Figgins, and Golen, 1984). The enterprising businessperson needs to learn to think of negative occurrences as opportunities.

Taking advantage of the opportunities that lie beyond the task at hand requires both the discipline to be able to continue probing to find the necessary insight and the willingness and the flexibility to act on that insight. (Himstreet, Baty, and Lehman, 1993). And it must be remembered that each letter is important. Almost everyone knows that businesses exist to provide goods and services to customers and that they must do so at a profit if they are to survive and prosper. Thus, businesses exist for and by selling (Buskirk and Buskirk, 1992). So in generating business correspondence, letter writers should always be looking for ways to do and say what is right in given situations while simultaneously extending themselves to enhance the good will and, if possible, the sales of the company (Vik, Wilkinson, and Wilkinson, 1990; Rittman and Gonzalez, 1991; Locker, 1992).

If a person is to develop such an outlook there are certain points that should be kept in mind. This is because there are certain qualities that effective letters need to possess if they are to accomplish the task at hand while also influencing future sales positively.

Courtesy is critical.

The most fundamental characteristic of business letters should be courtesy. This is much more than simply a cleverly articulated "please" or "thank you" and it is a quality that should not be strained. The reader must sense a genuine concern for his or her perspective and feelings. Probably the best way for the overworked correspondent to maintain a focus on the importance of courtesy is to keep remembering the invisible connection between these letters and that same correspondent's pay checks. If those letters are well received and they successfully build good will, then the resultant sales may well insure that employee's ability to keep his or her job or to advance through a series of promotions (Bohner, 1992; Napier and Driskill, 1992).

Consider the following note as an example of what not to do:

> *Congratulations, Team!*
>
> *Thanks to your slackened standards of attire and flippant behavior toward our customers we fell only $2,300 below quota last month. Be sure to pick up your bonus checks on the way home this evening.*
>
> *I. M. Peeved*
> *General Manager*

The manager who dashes off such a message may feel better in the short-term, enjoying his own use of facetious irony, but it is hard to imagine that the recipients of such a communication are likely to extend themselves in the future for such a supervisor. Not only has he failed to motivate his salespersonnel but he may well have aggravated an atmosphere that was already negative. Everyone involved with such a communication loses.

Proper use of English is a must.

Although the content of any communication is paramount, an uncompromising attitude is essential when it comes to correctness, both in terms of form and appearance and in terms of the proper use of English (Guffey, 1991). This is important for a number of reasons. Of course the correspondent wants every communication to make a good impression on its recipient or recipients. That impression is by definition a first reaction based on appearance and manifest

technical precision. That reaction may be virtually knee-jerk in nature or even unconscious but it is very real. Other than a blatant factual error, it is safe to say that there is no other flaw a letter can have that will so undermine the reader's confidence in the writer and the organization that he or she represents as will poor form and appearance, or incorrect use of grammar. (Rittman and Gonzalez, 1991; Wolford and Vanneman, 1992).

But this is not simply a matter of adhering to a prescribed set of rules. Failure to use the language and its accompanying structures correctly can create confusion or worse. It may even convey a message which was completely unintended--and/or which is completely false. Or, it may simply distract the reader by interrupting the train of thought. Furthermore, since the writer is trying to accomplish a purpose and since any of these reactions can undermine the accomplishment of that purpose, the matter of correctness cannot be compromised. To put this another way, anything which obscures clarity or interferes with the accomplishment of the writer's purpose needs to be eliminated; therefore, anything which is incorrect needs to be eliminated whether it is an error of fact, an error of form, or an error of English usage (Wells, 1988).

Focus on the recipient's point of view

Since every business communication involves some element of persuasion, one aspect of the composition process should be adherence to good sales strategy. Each communication should explain why it is in the reader's best interest to do what the writer wants him or her to do. And, it should make its points by adhering to the reader's perspective as much as possible. Thus, the communication should be written as a service to the recipient (Baldwin, 1988; Thill and Bovee, 1993).

The following memo, written by a former student of the author (Roberts, 1985), provides an example of what could have been done in the same hypothetical situation as I. M. Peeved's earlier cited ill-advised and derogatory note. (Of course, that previous note was actually written as a deliberately flawed example by the author of this paper.)

Date: *July 10, 1985*
To: *All Sales Personnel*
From: *Mary Roberts, General Manager*
Subject: *Public Image of Mendel's*

As you know, Mendel's has a reputation for quality in all areas of its operation. The thing that <u>most</u> distinguishes Mendel's from other department stores is you--its courteous, impeccably groomed sales people.

> *Recently the President's office has received several complaints about the manners and appearance of some of our salespersons. While the matter has been discussed with the individuals involved, this memo is a reminder to:*
>
> 1. *Treat each customer courteously in the Mendel's tradition;*
> 2. *Take the time and effort to make sure that your appearance fits the Mendel's image.*
>
> *You are here because you do fit the Mendel's image, and if you are having a problem maintaining it for any reason, let's talk.*

Utilizing the principles that are involved in the ideas that have just been discussed--achieving correctness and applying sales strategy within business communications--is much like utilizing the principles of good nutrition in arriving at a healthy diet; for those who are sufficiently determined and willing to do a little fundamental research from time to time, it can be said that anyone can implement these principles and do so successfully. Perhaps it is true that clever or humorous letters that sparkle with personality can only be written by people with certain gifts. If this is true then the rest of us would probably be wise not to try to achieve those particular kinds of impact. But when it comes to the basics, there are no special aptitudes beyond conscientious application and scrupulous care that are required to accomplish the desired purposes. Too often poor business writers will attempt to hide behind such feeble statements as, "I just can't write," or "You just don't know how hard writing is for me." Actually, these are non-excuses--irrational defensive exclamations--and they certainly aren't reasons. Any intelligent and competent person who is capable of carrying on an informed conversation can learn to write straightforward, courteous correspondence that delivers messages clearly and that encourages sales.

Employ selectivity in the use of form letters

When business writers feel insecure about their professional writing, it is certainly tempting to draw upon form letters excessively. To do so is a mistake. Despite their ease of use, most recipients don't like to receive form letters, and despite the improvements that have been achieved through the use of word processors, sophisticated readers still know when one has been received.

An alternative that should be considered is the guide letter which is much like the form letter. It is also variously referred to as a prototype or boiler-plate letter (Andrews and Andrews, 1992). The point of difference from the form letter is that the guide letter is just that--a guide and a guide only, a device that is adapted and modified with appropriate particulars to fit the specific situation; and so, for example, in a given situation the guide letter may be modified to include a new paragraph or two if they are appropriate. Word processors are very helpful in facilitating the use of guide letters.

Include personality in routine communications

Adapting the guide letter or any communication to a particular situation also means adapting it to a particular audience. In doing so, the communication should be imparted in a way in which the audience can sense the personality of the writer in the correspondence (Locker, 1992). The best way of building friendships for the organization is for the writer to dare to be warm, friendly, and engaging.

Consider the following gimmicky ditty from Wells (1988):

With our compliments. . .

... a ditty from Foster's,
who are here to serve you.

You've no doubt heard about the bugs
Who have little ones which bite 'em -
An entomological chain reaction
That goes on ad infinitum.

Well, we at Foster's form a link
In the same kind of bug-like chain.
The cash must flow both in and out,
For the chain to work again.

From you to us at Foster's
Then on to our purchasing crew.
They spend it at the wholesaler's
And in turn he spends it too.

So you're a link within this chain
And we happily count on you.
Your patronage is vital if
The chain is to work anew.

(Just a little bit of poetry
Giving us a chance to say
We'd very much appreciate your check
If you could forward it today.)

Respect local norms in the use of e-mail

An emergent special category of internal communication is electronic mail or "e-mail"--the sending of a message from one computer to another. Because this is a fairly new medium, standards of what is acceptable or unacceptable may vary considerably from one

organizational context to another. Within certain informal settings the communications will be simple and unstructured, evidencing a lack of concern about elementary errors in grammar or spelling and more. In other circumstances more traditional standards of grammar, structure, spelling, and formatting will be expected to be evident in the transmission. Along with everything else the originator of such a communication must be aware of what is acceptable and needs to take that into consideration as well (Yates, 1992).

Use a sensible approach

There are a number of areas which the professional writer should take into consideration. The following questions are almost always appropriate:

1. What do I want? What purpose do I hope to accomplish? What are the immediate objectives as well as the long term goals? Why would it be in my audience's self interest to help facilitate the accomplishment of my purpose?

2. What do I want to say? How can I phrase my message in a way that will help me accomplish my purpose? What should I include? What is best left unmentioned?

3. How do I want the message to impact on my audience? What attitude can I expect my audience to take? What are the consequences in terms of how the letter should be crafted?

4. What tone will be most effective? Exactly how do I want the message to "sound" to the audience? How can the tone help in furthering the accomplishment of my purposes?

5. What is the context of this situation and the history of its development? How has it evolved? What correspondence has preceded this? Should anything be reviewed before I begin writing?

6. What else is involved here? Who else? What other considerations are involved? (Flower and Hayes, 1980; Walsh, 1991).

Ask relevant review questions

There are also a number of follow-up questions that the intelligent business writer will ask before finalizing a communication no matter how positive it may seem:

1. Have I begun my correspondence in a way that my reader will find interesting?

2. Have I properly emphasized my primary purposes without neglecting any of my secondary purposes? Does the sequencing flow naturally? Is the content clear, concise, and concrete? (Murphy and Hildebrandt, 1991). In consideration of my audience, is it written at an appropriate level technically?

3. Has my reader's viewpoint been given the fullest possible consideration in every respect? Do I express sufficient confidence in my reader without being excessively or inappropriately humble? Does the tone work throughout the communication, and continuously contribute to my effectiveness?

4. Is my communication grammatically and mechanically correct? Is it correct in form and appearance as well (Bowman and Branchaw, 1979)?

If a person can genuinely answer both sets of questions favorably then the probability of the success of the communication will have increased enormously. If the writer can develop the discipline necessary to utilize such an approach consistently, then the likelihood is that all of that writer's correspondence will improve substantially. And if that happens, any opportunities which used to slip away will begin to reap a harvest of success.

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